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Review: *Word of Mouth: What We Talk About When We Talk About Food*, by Priscilla

Parkhurst Ferguson

Cornelia Gerhardt

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*Word of Mouth: What We Talk About When We Talk About Food*

Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson

Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2014

xxiv + 271 pp. Illustrations. \$29.95 (cloth)

In *Word of Mouth: What We Talk About When We Talk About Food*, sociology professor Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson explores a variety of texts, such as menus, movies, children's stories, and comic strips, that are relevant to diverse aspects of the culinary cultures of the United States and France. Her cultural reading looks for "the telling example, the vivid illustration, and the revelatory quote" (p.xix) to find the exemplary and construct social relations, i.e., structures, in the food world.

"Part I: From Talk to Text" opens with a chapter entitled "Thinking about Food." The supremacy of French cuisine is traced to French centralism and competitive cooking, while in the United States it is competitive eating that is very much emblematic of its food culture. Culinary nationalism is defined by the authenticity of a country's foodstuff. Chapter 2, "The Perils and Pleasures of Consumption," illustrates the fundamental issue that food is not only necessary and potentially pleasurable, but also risky and potentially lethal. The last chapter of the section, "Texts Take Over," visits food writing starting with late second-century Rome (Athenaeus) to trace the development of different genres and the creation of a cultural field. It ends with a description of today's food writing by looking at the discourse of chocolate, which has changed tremendously in the last few decades.

The second section, "New Cooks, New Chefs," starts with a chapter on "Iconic Cooks" that focuses on domestic cooking and cookbooks in the United States by considering the influence of women such as Irma Rombauer and Julia Child. In "Chefs and Chefing" the author contrasts this to the hype around celebrity chefs, their "conspicuous production," and the question of how far can chefs go in experimentation with food (e.g., Adrià at elBulli). In her opinion, these two discourses become blurred in today's food talk.

The third section visits another "culinary confusion" (p.138) by considering dining in and out in "The Culinary Landscape in the Twenty-First Century." Chapter 6, "Dining on the Edge," exemplifies that "in" and "out" must be seen on a scale as functions of each other rather than as dichotomies in today's culinary world in the United States. In a continuous quest for newness, dining becomes more

individualized and informal, and it becomes less clear what represents a proper meal. Finally, in "Haute Food," the author describes how chefs transform themselves into hosts and diners into guests with the help of free gifts like *amuse-bouche*. Haute food (like burgers with foie gras at Wendy's) penetrates everyday life and stands for the culinary world of the twenty-first century.

The strongest point of the book is its use of an array of texts—high and low culture, everyday, scholarly and sublime—to focus on different aspects of food culture. It is not so much the single reading that is the most convincing in this book, but the wealth of perspectives sought to support different points. Reading this book feels like shadowing someone who looks at the world through a food lens (a bagel?) and finds meaningful messages about food culture all around her. For instance, how cooking is women's work, but chefs are prototypically male, is convincingly argued in light of the cultural products visited.

To its disadvantage, there are no direct cross-references between the notes section and the actual text—neither page numbers nor endnote numbering. This forces one to read two texts in one book at the same time. In addition, this book is rather a misnomer. There is no clear connection between the content of the book and the meaning of the expression "word of mouth," besides perhaps the most general idea of transmission. The subtitle, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Food," does not clarify this literal use, but promises a topic that the book simply does not contain. It does not furnish an analysis of food talk—i.e., spoken discourse about food—aside from a few quotes from interviews with chefs or conversations with the author's mother (despite sociology's long tradition in the field, cf. Gerhardt [2013]: 26–39 for sociological and linguistic literature). As the author herself writes, "Strictly construed, of course, we are mostly talking about writing, not talk" (p.50).

Nevertheless, this essayistic book is a true joy to read because of the density and lucidity of the author's writing, her style, and her wide knowledge in the field. For this reason it can be recommended to anyone interested in an enlightening and entertaining account about various aspects of food culture in the United States and France.

—Cornelia Gerhardt, Saarland University

REFERENCES

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